



Ahimsā

Newsletter of the Charleston Buddhist Fellowship

September 2006 (2550)

Translator for the Buddha: An Interview with Bhikkhu Bodhi

For the last quarter century, the American-born monk Bhikkhu Bodhi has immersed himself in the Pali Canon and is now a respected interpreter of its content and meaning. His English translations of the Majjhima Nikāya and Saṃyutta Nikāya (Wisdom Publications, 1995 and 2000) have become favorites of Western students of the Dhamma. Inquiring Mind conducted an e-mail interview with Bhikkhu Bodhi in the fall of 2005 upon the publication of his new anthology of sutta passages, In the Buddha's Words (Wisdom, 2005).

Inquiring Mind (IM): How did you become interested in translating the *suttas*?

Bhikkhu Bodhi (BB): When I first ordained, I did not have any intention to become a translator. My first Buddhist teacher, a Vietnamese monk with whom I lived in California back in the late 1960s, impressed on me the importance of learning the canonical languages of Buddhism, beginning with Pali, as a tool for understanding the *Dhamma*. When I arrived in Śrī Lanka and took ordination as a Theravāda monk in 1972, I was eager to learn Pali in order to gain direct access to the original collections of the Buddha's discourses. I deliberately choose Ven. Balangoda Ananda Maitreya to be my teacher because, at the time, he was reputed to be one of the top scholar-monks in Śrī Lanka. He was certainly the foremost Sinhalese scholar-monk fluent in English and was also a very gentle and lovable person.

In 1974, I spent time with the German monk Nyanaponika Mahāthera, the president and editor of the Buddhist Publication Society in Kandy. While staying with him, I used his notebook translations from the 1950s to improve my knowledge of commentarial-style Pali. At the end of 1975, I moved to Kandy to live with Ven. Nyanaponika. He had seen some of my personal translations and suggested I translate the Brahmajāla Sutta (the first sutta in the *Dīgha Nikāya*) with its commentary and subcommentaries. The resulting work, which commenced my "career" as a translator, was published as *The Discourse on the All-Embracing Net of Views* (1978).

IM: What observations have you made regarding the role of the *suttas* to Western students of the *Dhamma* in particular? And how/why has this motivated you to help make English-language translations available to Westerners?

BB: During the period immediately preceding my departure for Asia and ordination as a monk in

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Activities

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship:

- Conducts informal seminars on Buddhism.
- Prepares and distributes free educational material.

Programs

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship sponsors the following programs:

- Instructions in meditation.
- Dhamma study groups.
- Retreats (at IMC-USA).

There are no fees for any of the activities or programs offered by the organization. Seminars are designed to present basic information about Buddhism to the general public — anyone may attend. However, study groups and meditation instructions are open to members only.

Retreats last ten days and are coordinated through IMC-USA in Westminster, MD (410-346-7889). Fees are set by IMC-USA. Advance registration is required.

One-on-one discussions about one's individual practice or about Buddhism in general are also available upon request. These discussions are accorded confidential treatment. There is no fee for one-on-one discussions. ■

Purpose of the Charleston Buddhist Fellowship

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship is an educational organization whose purpose is to preserve and promote the original teachings of the Buddha in the West.

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship actively encourages an ever-deepening process of commitment among Westerners to live a Buddhist way of life in accordance with the original teachings of the Buddha.

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship provides free educational material to those who want to learn about Buddhism and about how to put the teachings of the Buddha into practice.

The goals of the Charleston Buddhist Fellowship are:

1. To provide systematic instruction in the Dhamma, based primarily on Pali sources.
2. To promote practice of the Dhamma in daily life.
3. To provide guidance on matters relating to the Dhamma, its study, and its practice.
4. To encourage the study of the Pali language and literature.
5. To maintain close contact with individuals and groups interested in promoting and supporting the foregoing goals. ■

Dhamma Study Group

An on-going Dhamma study group focusing on the book *A Practice Guide to the Path of Purification* is meeting Sunday mornings at 11:00 o'clock at the home of Allan Bomhard (940 Rutledge Avenue, Charleston, SC 29403-3206). Call (843) 720-8531 for directions to Allan's home. There is no fee to participate in this group. ■

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1972, the interest in Buddhism among young Americans tended to be anti-intellectual. While most Westerners who went to Asia in quest of Theravāda teachings found themselves in forest monasteries in Thailand or meditation centers in Burma, my karmic connections led me to Śrī Lanka and to teachers who were steeped in the scriptures and were ready to guide a Western student eager to learn them.

When I started to read the Pali *suttas*, I was exhilarated by their clarity, intellectual rigor, delicate beauty, and subtle emotional fervor, which shimmers just beneath their tranquil surface. I started translating *suttas* and passages from the commentaries simply to make them intelligible to myself, not to publish them. In time, though, I came to see that Western Buddhism was characterized by a gaping void: lack of a clear knowledge of the Buddha's own teachings. I thus thought it extremely important that the *suttas* be translated in lucid, contemporary language accompanied by a body of annotations that brings out their deeper meanings and practical relevance. This, to date, has been my life's work.

IM: What role has scholarship and study of the *suttas* had in your own practice and spiritual development?

BB: Many new Western Buddhists take the word *practice* as almost synonymous with meditation and then drive a sharp wedge between study and practice. They assume that, if a monk is devoted to scholarship, he can't be a serious practitioner, as if scholarship were somehow antithetical to real practice. I have to admit that my own meditation practice has fallen far short of my ideal, but I ascribe this largely to a chronic health condition (a personal karmic obstacle with which I must deal) rather than to a dedication to scholarship and a concern to translate the Buddhist scriptures.

We should remember that in Buddhist Asia down

through the centuries, in virtually all traditions, the main task of the monastic order has been the preservation and transmission of the Buddhist teachings, done primarily through the intensive study, investigation and propagation of Buddhist scriptures and philosophy. This has formed the foundation stone upon which all higher achievements in Buddhist practice have rested, the skeleton that has supported the muscles and organs of Buddhism. While all traditions preserve accounts of unlettered meditators who have attained deep realization, the most outstanding representatives in all traditions have been those who combine both doctrinal sophistication and meditative realization. One suspects that even the hagiographical stories of illiterate sages are pious exaggerations.

The interrelationship of study and scholarship with practice is, I feel, a complex issue about which there is no single answer suitable for everyone. Some people will naturally gravitate towards one or another of these two poles. What can be said unequivocally is that scholarly knowledge without practical application is barren; vigorous meditation practice without the guiding light of clear conceptual understanding is futile. Without knowledge of the texts, I fear, within a couple of generations, a practice tradition will easily become diluted, chewed up, and digested by the surrounding culture, especially when that culture is a theistic or a materialistic one.

IM: Please comment on the value of *sutta* study in the practice of a contemporary Western lay Buddhist.

BB: To explain the value of *sutta* study in one's practice, let's first raise the questions: What is practice? What is practice all about? If we don't press hard on these questions, we'll instinctively bring into our practice our own unexamined assumptions about the purpose of practice, and then our practice can easily become subservient to our personal agendas or our cultural biases rather

than a means to fulfilling the goal set for it by the Buddha. It seems to me that this is what has happened in Western Buddhism and explains why it has been transforming the tradition in ways that some might consider a compromise with modern psychology or secular humanism.

Studying the *Dhamma*, however, isn't a matter of picking up a load of cultural baggage from ancient India and dumping it in our backyard. It must be done with careful discrimination and critical thought. Properly undertaken, the study of the *Dhamma* is precisely the way we learn and internalize the framework of the Buddha's teachings. It is how we acquire a sound understanding of the principles that underlie and permeate the teachings, and, even more importantly, how we nurture the seeds of wisdom in our minds.

Our first task in treading the Buddha's path is, after all, to acquire Right View, the first factor of the Noble Eightfold Path, our navigator along the entire spiritual journey. Right View initially arises through "hearing," which includes reading Buddhist texts and studying the *Dhamma* under qualified teachers, and through "reflection," reasoned contemplation of the teachings intrinsically and in relation to our own life. It is when our view is clear and sharp that our faith in the Buddha becomes well established, and it is on the basis of Right View and sound faith that meditation practice can move towards its intended aim.

True wisdom emerges by investigating what is wholesome and what is unwholesome: what leads to our own true welfare and happiness and promotes the well-being of others, and what leads to harm and suffering for ourselves and others. All this comes from careful study of the scriptures, and this is only a minute fraction of what one finds in the texts. What we learn we have to examine, reflect upon and inwardly absorb through contemplation, and then penetrate by

direct insight.

IM: What are some ways one might incorporate reading/study of the *suttas* into one's practice?

BB: First one has to know where to begin. For a newcomer to the *suttas*, I suggest starting with a little gem, Ven. Nyanatiloka's anthology, *The Word of the Buddha* (published by the Buddhist Publication Society, available from www.pariyatti.com). An alternative is the schematic selection of texts on the Access to Insight website; I also recommend the webmaster's essay "Befriending the Suttas." As the next step—or perhaps even for beginners—I would throw modesty to the winds and recommend *In the Buddha's Words* (after all, they're mostly *his* words, not mine). Then, for one who wants to go on to a full collection, I suggest the *Majjhima Nikāya*. Our Bodhi Monastery website contains almost three years' worth of my lectures on the *Majjhima suttas* (www.bodhimonastery.net/mntalks_audio.html). These can help serious students obtain a detailed understanding of these texts.

Then *how* to study: I suggest the first time one simply read each *sutta* through to gain an initial acquaintance with it. Then read it a second time and make notes. After one becomes familiar with a range of texts, list a number of topics that seem to be dominant and repeated themes, and use these as the rubrics for future readings. As one proceeds, make notes from the texts and sort them under these topics, adding new topics whenever necessary; always include the textual references. Over time—after a year or a couple of years—one will gradually acquire a "global view" of the *Dhamma*, so that one can see how virtually all the teachings fit together into a consistent whole, like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.

I also want to emphasize that the *suttas* stem from the earliest period of Buddhist literary history and thus constitute the common heritage of the entire Buddhist tradition. So to study them is not a task

solely for followers of Theravāda Buddhism or of Theravāda-based *vipassanā*; it is a task, indeed a responsibility, of Buddhists belonging to all schools who want to understand the taproot of Buddhism.

IM: What are some pitfalls or potential dangers in the use of the scriptures?

BB: One potential danger in the use of the scriptures was clearly pointed out by the Buddha in the Discourse on the Simile of the Snake (*Majjhima Nikāya* 22). He speaks of those who learn the *suttas* but, instead of practicing the teaching, use their knowledge to criticize others and prove their skill in debates. The Buddha compares this to grasping a water snake by the tail: the snake will turn around and bite one's arm, causing death or critical pain. I have seen numerous Westerners, myself too at times, fall into this trap. Though one starts with the best intentions, one grasps the teaching with a dogmatic mind, uses one's knowledge to dispute with others, and then becomes locked in a "battle of interpretation" with those who interpret the texts in different ways. Another danger is to let one's capacity for critical thought fly out the window and buy into everything the *suttas* say. After all, there is quite a lot in the *suttas* that can't stand up against modern scientific knowledge. We can't criticize Christian creationists while we become Buddhist variants of the same.

IM: What are some of your favorite *sutta* passages?

BB: When I first began to read Buddhist texts while I was in graduate school, I was naturally impressed by the Buddha's teachings on dependent origination, the five aggregates, nonself, etc., which take us to the heart of the *Dhamma*. But one of the *suttas* that made the strongest impressions on me is not to be found among these deep texts on meditation and realization. When I read the *suttas* on dependent

origination and nonself, I thought: the Buddha is certainly enlightened, but maybe not perfectly so. However, when I came to the Sigālaka Sutta (*Dīgha Nikāya* 31) my doubts were dispelled. When I read this *sutta*, particularly the section on "worshipping the six directions" (*In the Buddha's Words*, pp. 116–18), and saw how one who had fathomed the deepest truths of existence could also teach in detail parents how to bring up their children, a husband and a wife how to love and respect each other, and an employer how to care for his workers, I then knew: This teacher is indeed perfectly enlightened. To my mind, this *sutta* showed that the Buddha possessed not only the "ascendant wisdom" that rises up to the highest truth, but the "descending wisdom", embraced by compassion, that drops down again to the level of the world and, in the light of the fullest realization, teaches and guides others in the way that suits them best.

One of the features of the *suttas* that impressed me the most, when I first read them and even now, are the similes. It seems that the Buddha was capable of picking up any natural phenomenon or any object from everyday life and turning it into a striking simile that conveys an important point about his teaching. The sun, moon, and stars; flowers and trees, rivers, lakes, and oceans; the changes of the seasons; lions, monkeys, elephants, and horses; kings, ministers, and warriors; craftsman, surgeons, and thieves—the list of things that enter into his similes becomes almost endless. Sometimes, you might be reading a series of *suttas* that seem as dry as dust, and suddenly you come across a simile so fresh and vivid that the image never fades from your mind even after decades.

IM: What are some of the particular challenges you face as a translator?

BB: Any language, I have found, has an underlying conceptual scheme built into it by the metaphors that govern its vocabulary and by the connotations and nuances of its words. Thus, in

translating from one language into another, one is always faced with the problem of dissonance between their two underlying conceptual schemes. This leads to conflicts that often can only be resolved by sacrificing important conceptual connections in the original language for the sake of elegance or intelligibility in the target language. This problem becomes all the more acute when one is translating from an ancient language utilizing a somewhat archaic set of conceptual metaphors into a modern language pertaining to a very different culture.

We can see this problem in some of the simplest Pali words. For instance, the word *samādhi* can be translated as “concentration, composure, collectedness, mental unification, etc.,” but none of these renderings convey the idea that *samādhi* denotes a specific meditative state, or set of meditative states, in the Buddhist (and broader Indian) system of spiritual cultivation. Even the word *sati*, rendered “mindfulness”, isn’t unproblematic. The word derives from a verb, *sarati*, meaning “to remember,” and occasionally in Pali, *sati* is still explained in a way that connects it with the idea of memory. But, when it is used in relation to meditation practice, we have no word in English that precisely captures what it refers to. An early translator cleverly drew upon the word *mindfulness*, which is not even in my dictionary. This has served its role admirably, but it does not preserve the connection with memory, sometimes needed to make sense of a passage.

Satipaṭṭhāna is often translated “foundation of mindfulness,” which sounds elegant; but, if one knows Pali one might suspect that the compound represents not *sati* + *paṭṭhāna* (which gives us “foundation of mindfulness”), but *sati* + *upaṭṭhāna*, “establishment of mindfulness” (the *u* dropping off through union of vowels). Then, if one knows the texts in the original, one will have encountered a number of phrases that pair *sati* with words related to *upaṭṭhāna*, such as *upaṭṭhitassati*, “one with mindfulness

established,” but no other phrases that pair it with forms related to *paṭṭhāna*. And this would confirm the case for “establishment of mindfulness” over “foundation of mindfulness.” However more graceful the latter might sound, the accent is on the internal process of setting mindfulness up rather than on the object to which it applies.

IM: As you look at the adaptations being made to traditional Theravāda teachings by Western teachers, which ones do you see as being useful and which not so useful?

BB: I’m reluctant to make judgments about what other teachers are doing, but I will merely point to one important adaptation that has taken place in the contemporary teaching of *vipassanā* meditation that can easily pass unnoticed. I get the impression that the purpose for which mindfulness meditation is being taught in the West has undergone a sea change from its traditional function, perhaps because many Western teachers are teaching outside the framework of classical Buddhist doctrine. Mindfulness meditation, it seems, is now taught mainly as a means to heighten our experience of the present moment. The aim of the practice is to enable us to accept everything that happens to us without discrimination. Through heightened mindfulness of the present moment, we learn to accept everything as intrinsically good, to see everything as instructive, to experience everything as inherently rewarding. We can thus simply abide in the present, heartily accepting whatever comes, open to the ever-fresh, ever-unpredictable flow of events.

Now at a certain level, such a style of teaching does impart valuable lessons to us. It is certainly much better to accept whatever comes than to live eagerly pursuing pleasure and anxiously fleeing pain. It is much wiser to see the positive lessons inherent in pain, loss, and transience than to bemoan our miserable fate. However, to present this as the main point of the Buddha’s teaching would be, in my view, a misinterpretation of the

Dhamma. The Buddha's teaching, as given in the *suttas*, has quite a different logic behind it. The teaching isn't designed to culminate in acceptance of the world, but to lead out beyond the confines of conditioned experience to that which transcends the world, to the ageless and deathless, which is also the cessation of suffering. Simply maintaining awareness of the present in order to arrive at a detached acceptance of the present could easily lead through the back door to a reconciliation with *samsāra*, to a *reaffirmation* of *samsāra*, not to release from *samsāra*.

In the classical teaching, through mindful attention to the present, we zoom in on the arising and passing away of phenomena in order to gain insight into their impermanence. But we don't affirm the impermanence of things; it is not in this way that we reach the end of suffering. The insight into impermanence, *anicca*, becomes, rather, the gateway to the insights into *dukkha*, the flawed nature of all conditioned things, and *anattā*, the selfless nature of all phenomena. And insight into these three characteristics brings disenchantment with all conditioned things. From disenchantment comes dispassion, and from dispassion liberation, the realization of *nibbāna* here and now.

The core of the Buddha's teaching is not simply the thesis that removing clinging enables us to live free from anxiety and grief. This is a partial statement of the relationship between the first two Noble Truths, but it doesn't take us deep enough. A deeper analysis of the Four Noble Truths has to bring in the Five Aggregates of Clinging as the essential meaning of the truth of suffering; it has to bring in the truth that suffering originates from the craving for sense pleasures and the craving for continued existence; and it has to bring in the truth that suffering—the suffering of our bondage to the round of birth and death—ends only with the exhaustion of craving. If this isn't done, even the teaching of the Four Truths, the heart of the *Dhamma*, won't be complete.

Of course, any teacher has to determine when it's appropriate to present such radical teachings full strength. Even the Buddha himself fully taught the Four Noble Truths only when he was sure his audience included people who could comprehend them. But, for the proper *Dhamma* to flourish, there has to be at least an acknowledgment of the claims these teachings make upon us, even if we decide that we must first prepare the ground for them with more expedient adaptations of the liberating path.

IM: It's striking in the *suttas* that the Buddha never recommends to anyone his own path of the *bodhisattva* leading to buddhahood, but talks instead only of arahantship as the goal. Why do you think this is?

BB: This is a question to which I have given a great deal of thought but haven't been able to arrive at a final answer. Several ideas about the Buddha found in the *suttas* conjointly point toward an embryonic doctrine of a *bodhisattva* career during the Buddha's own lifetime. It thus seems hard to believe that, while the Buddha was alive, there weren't people who were inspired by his own example as compassionate liberator and, rather than aim at direct attainment of arahantship, instead aspired to attain the supreme enlightenment of buddhahood at some future time. It also seems hard to believe that they wouldn't have approached the Buddha to ask for guidance in pursuing this goal and received a fitting reply.

But, if this is the case, then the question arises: Why don't we find any teachings on the path to buddhahood in the *suttas*? Why should they appear for the first time only in later texts like the Jātakas, Avadānas, and the early Mahāyāna sutras?

I can't provide a definite answer to this difficult and tantalizing question, but I can offer two competing hypotheses, neither of which is satisfactory. (1) In the oldest period, the Buddha was viewed merely as the first of the *arahants*,

surpassing the others simply in his pedagogic skills and personal charisma. Objection: This hypothesis implies that almost everything that we find in the *suttas* about the Buddha's powers, types of knowledge, and exalted stature is later accretion, which undercuts the credibility of the texts themselves. (2) The early Buddhist councils were held by monks who pursued the *arahant* ideal, so they deliberately excluded texts irrelevant to their concerns, including those on the *bodhisattva* path. Objection: The extant collections include texts giving the Buddha's advice to householders, housewives, and kings on the fulfillment of their respective duties, so they might just as well have included texts giving his advice to *bodhisattvas*.

So neither of these hypotheses works. The easiest answer I've been able to come up with—though it's not an entirely satisfactory one—is that by his character and conduct the Buddha served as the model for *bodhisattva*-aspirants, but since his teaching is ultimately about the attainment of liberation, he cannot teach competing conceptions of the final goal. Hence, his teaching must finally exalt the person who realizes the final goal, the *arahant*, and describe the path to arahantship. In any case, the *arahant*'s path described in the early teachings served as the foundation for the *bodhisattva* path as elaborated in later Sectarian Buddhism and the Mahāyāna, so that the latter becomes impossible without the former.

IM: Some people feel that the commentaries, especially those by Buddhaghosa, present a different viewpoint—a more narrow interpretation of *Dhamma* practice—than the *suttas*. How do you see the basic *Dhamma* understanding of the *suttas* as compared to that in the commentaries? In what ways are they the same or different?

BB: The relationship between the *suttas* and the commentaries is an extremely complex one, and it is risky to make blanket judgments about it. The

commentaries are not original works by Buddhaghosa, but edited versions of more ancient commentaries that had been preserved in Śrī Lanka. Their historical origins are obscure, but, clearly, they begin with the *suttas* themselves; that is, there are *suttas* that are commentaries on other *suttas* (e.g., MN 141, SN 12:31, SN 22:3, 4). During the early period of oral transmission, the ancient Buddhist teachers must have developed a body of commentary to go along with the root text, and this no doubt accumulated with each generation in the way a rolling snowball gathers snow.

The old Śrī Lankan commentaries upon which Buddhaghosa drew—no longer extant—were probably an archaeological treasure trove of material from several centuries, perhaps beginning with the personal disciples of the Buddha. Even in the commentaries we inherit, the most ancient layers seem to precede the division of the original unitary *Sangha* into different Buddhist schools, for they contain material that has found its way into the exegetical traditions of various sects. The later material originates from the teachers of the Theravāda lineage after it emerged as a distinct school and thus reflects its own methods of interpretation. There was also a tendency for the schools to exchange interpretative material, but unlike other schools, the conservative Theravādins, to their credit, rigorously kept the newer material outside the canonical works directly ascribed to the Buddha.

To understand what the commentaries are doing at the doctrinal level, we have to remember that the *suttas* themselves are not uniquely Theravāda texts. They are the Theravādin transmission of a class of scriptures common to all the early Buddhist schools, each of which must have had its own way of interpreting them. The commentaries that come to us from Buddhaghosa (and others) take up the task of interpreting these texts from the standpoint of the Theravāda school. Their view is thus necessarily narrower than that of the *suttas*

because it is more specific: they view the thought-world of the *suttas* through the lens of the methods of exegesis developed by the early Theravādin teachers, using these methods to explicate and elaborate upon the early teachings.

If we compare the *suttas* to a vast expanse of open territory, reconnoitered from above as to the main features of its topography but with its details only lightly sketched, then we might compare the commentaries to a detailed account of the lay of the land. The question is: Are the commentaries simply coming in and describing the landscape in greater detail, or are they bringing in construction crews and building housing schemes, shopping malls, and highways on the virgin territory. The answer, I think, would be a combination of both.

To be brief, I would say there are two extreme attitudes one could take to the commentaries. One, often adopted by orthodox Theravādins, is to regard them as being absolutely authoritative almost on a par with the *suttas*. The other is to disregard them completely and claim they represent “a different take on the *Dhamma*.” I find that a prudent middle ground is to consult the commentaries and use them, but without clinging to them. Their interpretations are often illuminating, but we should also recognize that they represent a specific systematization of the early teaching. They are by no means necessitated by the early teaching, and on some points even seem to be in tension with it.

IM: Many of the *suttas* end by stating that those listening to these words understood, were very pleased, and oftentimes enlightened by their hearing and understanding. That’s really quite amazing to contemplate.

BB: The *suttas* themselves do not give an explanation, except to say that while the Buddha was speaking, the listener’s mind became “ready, receptive, free from hindrances, elated, and confident.” But often they say that before he

spoke, the Buddha gave the discourse out of consideration for a particular person or group of people in the audience, so he must have known in advance that this person or group of people had the capacity to realize the truth. I would attribute their agility in penetrating to the truth of the *Dhamma* to three factors. The first is their accumulation of sufficient *pāramīs*, or spiritual perfections, in previous births. I fully believe in the principle of rebirth, and I believe that enlightenment is to a great extent the fruit of one’s efforts expended over many lives in the development of such virtues as generosity, moral discipline, patience, energy, meditation, wisdom, loving-kindness, determination, and so forth. So, although these people might not have practiced *Dhamma* in this life before they met the Buddha Gotama, they would have fulfilled their *pāramīs* under numerous Buddhas of the past.

The second factor is a deep but unconscious yearning for purification and understanding of truth. This yearning might not have been operating at the surface level of their minds—they might have been busy merchants, humble housewives, or simple servants—but in their quiet moments, some urge towards truth, goodness, and spiritual beauty must have gripped their minds and caused a deep feeling of unrest in their hearts, an anguish that was only quenched when they met the Buddha and heard him preach.

A third factor, in some cases, could have been a stark encounter with suffering, either gross or subtle, that tore the veil of delusion away from their eyes and set them in quest of a path to final deliverance. When two or three of these factors were fulfilled, they were like lotus flowers at the surface of the pond, awaiting only the rising of the sun to blossom. The appearance of the Buddha was the rising of the sun, and his teaching of the *Dhamma* was the shedding of the sun’s rays that opened the lotuses of their minds to the ultimate truth. ■

Gender Issues in Buddhism

Posted on the Internet, Wednesday, 21 June 2006

Author Unknown

On the first day of the conference, there was a discussion on gender issues in Buddhism. It was surprising to learn that, in Buddhist countries like Thailand, Buddhist nuns are not properly recognized.

There was also some discussion on the unequal treatment of nuns and monks as well as some disparaging remarks about women attributed to the Buddha.

One audience member asked a very interesting question. How could the Buddha be said to be enlightened if he actually made such rules and such statements?

Ven. Dr. Yi Fa said that, at the time of the Buddha, the first 500 nuns to be ordained were from the higher strata of society while the monks were from the lower class of society. She suggested that perhaps the rules which might seem sexist were actually put in place to ensure that the nuns did not order the monks around as if they were their servants.

This was an unusual and interesting explanation, but the more plausible one was offered by Ven. Dr. Karma Lekshe Tsomo, who pointed out that the Pali Canon was not put into writing until several hundred years after the Buddha's death. It could very well be that some of those statements were later additions put in by the monks rather than the Buddha himself.

While this might seem like an easy cop-out answer, there are some strong reasons to believe this to be the case. Mettanando Bhikkhu, a Thai Buddhist monk who has studied at Oxford and Harvard, has written a detailed analysis of this issue. Below are excerpts of his analysis:

One of the key references that strongly discriminates against women is the legend of the origin of the nuns (*bhikkhuni*), in which the Buddha showed his strong disapproval of women's ordination as requested by Pajāpati Gotamī, his aunt and stepmother.

Ānanda, the Buddha's close attendant stepped in and negotiated on her behalf. As a result, the Buddha laid down a set of special rules, or the so-called "Eight Heavy Duties" that established the conditions for women's ordination, and nuns were required to adhere strictly to them for the rest of their lives.

The Eight Heavy Duties are:

1. A nun, even if she has been ordained for 100 years, must respect, greet, and bow in reverence to the feet of a monk, even if he has just been ordained that day. (Monks pay respect to each other according to their seniority, or the number of years they have been ordained.)
2. A nun is not to stay in a residence where there is no monk. (A monk may take an independent residence.)
3. A nun is to look forward to two duties: asking for the fortnightly *Uposatha* (meeting day), and receiving instructions by a monk every fortnight. (Monks do not depend on nuns for this obligatory rite, nor are they required to receive any instruction.)
4. A nun who has completed her rains-retreat must offer herself for instruction to both the community of monks and to the community of nuns, based on what is seen, what is heard, and what is doubted. (Monks only offer themselves to the community of monks.)
5. A nun who is put on probation for violating a monastic rule of *Sanghādisesā* must serve a minimum fifteen-day probation, with reinstatement requiring approval from both the monk and nun communities. (The minimum for monks is a five-day probation with no approval by the nuns required for reinstatement.)
6. A woman must be ordained by both monks and nuns and may be ordained only after a two-year postulancy, or training in six precepts. (Men have no mandatory postulancy, and their ordination is performed by monks only.)
7. A nun may not reprimand a monk. (A monk may reprimand a monk, and any monk may reprimand a nun.)

8. From today onwards, no nun shall ever teach a monk. However, monks may teach nuns. (There are no restrictions on whom a monk may teach.)

Apart from these discriminatory regulations against women, the Buddha further prophesized that, because of the women's ordination, the core teaching of his religion would be cut short from 1,000 to 500 years.

If this is true, then there is only one conclusion: the Buddha was a sexist. However, if one does a critical reading of the *Tipiṭaka*, it clearly shows a different picture of the Buddha's attitude towards women.

For example, in the Books of *Theragāthā* and *Therīgāthā* (psalms composed by enlightened monks and nuns), we see a situation in which a monk became enlightened by the teachings of a nun who, as a result, was respected as his mother. This contradicts the last rule of the Eight Heavy Duties, which prohibits a nun from teaching a monk.

Also, the phrase "from today onwards" suggests that there had been nuns who were previously teaching monks, and the rule was issued to stop the activity in the name of the Buddha. It seems, then, that the Duties were the work of a younger generation of monks who had negative attitudes towards women.

Elsewhere in the *Tipiṭaka*, we see no evidence of nuns acting as a cause of decay to Buddhism. On the contrary, several *suttas*, dated before the passing of the Buddha, never describe a visit of a king to a monk in order to learn the Dharma. However, three references in the *Tipiṭaka* mention visits of a king to see a nun while the Buddha was alive. In one episode, King Pasenadi of Kosala praised the teaching ability of nun Khema in front of the Buddha; he claimed that her teaching was as good as the Lord's himself!

Also, in the Books of *Theragāthā* and *Therīgāthā*, we see that Buddhist nuns were more active than monks in the promotion of the *Dhamma*. While monks tended to enjoy living a solitary life rather than living in a community, the

nuns had stronger community ties, where they were very much engaged in teaching and learning. One passage even describes a nun who professed boldly to the public, "come and listen to my teaching!" Such evangelical expression is not described in regard to any monk in the *Tipiṭaka*.

The Book of *Therīgāthā* was the first religious literature in the world known ever known to be composed by women. It shows the period at the earliest history of Buddhism when women enjoyed equal rights with their male counterparts.

These small pieces of evidence scattered in the *Tipiṭaka* confirm that the original teaching of the Buddha did not favor men over women. Unfortunately, however, elements of sexism found their way into the Buddhist community soon after the passing away of the Buddha in order to reinforce men's superior status over women.

The Eight Heavy Duties, as expounded in the legend of the origin of the order of nuns, became a social tool to gain control over the nuns, many of whom were outstanding teachers and successful enough to enlighten some monks.

Sex discrimination, or sexism, was not at all a part of the original teaching of the Buddha, who excluded no one. The Lord Buddha, we may conclude, was not a sexist.

Sadly, sexism is still prevalent today in most Buddhist countries of Southeast Asia, such as Sri Lanka, Myanmar (Burma), Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. Only some communities in Sri Lanka currently allow the ordination of women.

Elsewhere in Southeast Asia, ordination of women is illegal. The Ecclesiastical Council of Thailand, for example, has announced publicly that any monk who supports the ordination of women will be subject to severe punishment. Nevertheless, the Eight Heavy Duties are followed faithfully as authentic words of the Lord Buddha.

As long as there is no reformation of the religious education system in Buddhist countries, the religion will remain the biggest obstacle for the development of social justice and an end to sexism. ■



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